



## **NEW HANOVER COUNTY/CITY OF WILMINGTON OFFICIALS END REVIEW OF PERMITTING PROCESSES USED BY CATAWBA COUNTY AND MUNICIPALITIES**

Local governments from across Catawba County have completed their work with a team from New Hanover County and the City of Wilmington on a review of the planning and permit processes used by the local governments in Catawba County.

At an exit conference held on November 18, the team from New Hanover County/Wilmington said their review found that the policies and procedures used across Catawba County are working well, and they recommended a renewed emphasis on communication between the public and private sectors.

The costs of the study are being split on a 50/50 basis between the public sector, including Catawba County, the Town of Catawba, City of Claremont, City of Conover, City of Hickory, Town of Maiden, and the City of Newton and the public sector, which includes the Catawba County Chamber of Commerce and its Land Use Development Committee, the Home Builders Association of Hickory and the Catawba Valley, and the Catawba Valley Association of Realtors, Inc.

“Everyone we talked to has been open minded and willing to listen, and change, and do what’s necessary to make this work,” Jay Graham, New Hanover County’s Inspections Director, said as he led the report from the New Hanover/Wilmington group. “The county and cities have in place policies and procedures that work. Things are good here, you have good services, but everyone wants to make things even better.”

The New Hanover/Wilmington study team was asked to study six cases recommended by the Chamber’s Land Use Development Committee. Graham and Wilmington Planning Manager Ron Satterfield both noted that the turn-around times at various stages of the processes in those Catawba County cases was far faster than their own response times in New Hanover County. They also noted that the local governments have good professional staffs but observed that the government officials were too often serving as consultants to the private sector, a role they recommended be filled through the use of liaisons from the private sector to the local governments.

“This guide is a very good booklet,” Graham said, referring to a guide created by the Chamber of Commerce with input from the County and its municipalities to outline, to development professionals, the policies and procedures used across the county. “But it could be made better by including a list, provided by the Chamber of Commerce, of professionals working in the county who could assist developers, rather than having the government officials acting as consultants.”

Graham began his presentation with a reminder of the goals of the permit process review. The New Hanover/Wilmington team was asked to review the planning and permitting process and advise officials governing across Catawba County on the parts of the process that are working well and being done effectively, and on recommendations on ways to improve the processes used.

Graham then noted that, although the study team found that the policies and procedures in place across Catawba County were working well, a perception remains among the development community that it is very hard to develop in the county. The New Hanover/Wilmington team suggested that more frequent and open

communication between the public and private sectors would be important in making all of the processes involved work better. Their basic recommendations include the following:

- Establish a culture of core communication processes. The team indicated this should include a “culture of education and learning” for both the public and private sectors. Graham indicated this might include situations where the private sector continues to offer input to the local governments as to their concerns about the workings of regulations, or situations where private sector professionals are encouraged by their peers to seek more education on the latest laws and regulations.
- Work collaboratively to develop expectations across both sectors and stick to them. The New Hanover/Wilmington team recommended everyone involved in these issues “adopt a culture of owning the problem” so that those from both the public and private sectors would see challenges as issues that everyone should work together to resolve.
- The team suggested governments “reallocate taxpayer resources from consulting to effective instructing, advising and educating” representatives from the public sector with regard to laws and regulations.
- The team also recommended that the private sector assign staff from one of several associations to act as a liaison to the public sector, to both keep the exchange of information open and advise those in the development community on those professionals in the private sector who could serve as consultants.

“The New Hanover group did an amazing job, in a short period of time, of identifying the perceptions of the public and private sectors toward city and county government staff and elected officials,” said Gina King, chair of the Chamber’s Land Use Development Board and President-Elect of the Catawba Valley Association of Realtors. “They brought with them new ideas and mindsets that, hopefully, will be studied and implemented by all involved. A few of these are that we all have to remember who we ultimately work for, the taxpayers. We need to open our minds, policies, procedures and ordinances to new business, both big and small; easier developing, both ‘high-end’ and affordable; and, above all, better notification to the public of all planning, zoning and inspection processes or changes. It is ultimately all about communication and education.”

As the exit meeting drew to a close, representatives of both local governments and the private sector began to discuss the best ways to move forward on the recommendations from the New Hanover/Wilmington team. Although several groups already exist to provide for this kind of communication, including a Real Estate Development Board and the Chamber’s Land Use Development Committee, all those attending the meeting decided to begin thinking about who among their groups needs to be involved in creating new and permanent lines of communication in the future. The participants decided to begin with a separate meeting in the future, to which the entire list of stakeholders who were involved in the New Hanover/Wilmington study will be invited.

“I believe these meetings gave a very good exchange of information,” said Lynn Lail, Vice-Chair of the Catawba County Board of Commissioners. “It’s always good to have a different set of eyes to examine issues such as these. I believe this was a very helpful process for us in Catawba County and I am very happy to hear that this discussion was also helpful for the New Hanover County and Wilmington officials. I hope the professionals in our development community, including the Home Builders Association, the Realtors Association and the Chamber of Commerce, recognize that we are really working hard to listen to the folks in the public sector.”